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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [AMGT](#) [ECON](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)  
SUBJECT: TEKEL STRIKE: LAST GASP FOR LABOR MOVEMENT?

REF: A. 09 ANKARA 1829

- [1](#)B. ANKARA 174
- [1](#)C. ANKARA 184
- [1](#)D. ANKARA 201

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O,Grady, for reasons 1.4(b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Now in its 58th day, the TEKEL strike is emerging as a defining moment for Turkey's labor movement and a significant political challenge for Prime Minister Erdogan. The strikers continue to draw major media attention, not least from the 200 workers who launched a hunger strike five days ago and have seen some of their colleagues hospitalized as a result. A TEKEL delegation visited Parliament February 9 and was warmly received, naturally, by opposition CHP leader Baykal. PM Erdogan is adamantly opposed to making further concessions to TEKEL but has agreed under pressure to meet with Turk-Is labor confederation representatives to discuss a potential compromise. Still, Erdogan has little room to maneuver. The workers' demands to be transferred with full benefits to other public sector institutions, as in past privatizations, is probably not financially feasible -- particularly given its potential impact on the government's future privatization plans. Erdogan's personality also does not lend itself to any appearance that he has yielded to his opponents, but the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is clearly nervous that an anti-worker image will tarnish the party's appeal in traditional working-class AKP strongholds. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) The former TEKEL workers, now in their 58th day of work stoppage and protest for their post-privatization work conditions, are beginning to dominate the attention of the media and the government in Turkey. Nine of the group's 200 hunger strikers, now in their fifth day of protest at the Turk-Is headquarters, were hospitalized February 8. Local merchants and community members have been bringing food, blankets, and sundries to Turk-Is to support the workers, who spend most of their day demonstrating outside in freezing weather and spend the night in the Turk-Is conference room. The Prime Minister has finally agreed to meet again with Turk-Is, which is the confederation that houses the TEKEL workers' union TekGida-Is. Mehmet Ali Sahin, the Turkish Grand National Assembly Speaker, will meet on February 11 with the presidents of all six of the labor confederations

that supported the workers in a sympathy strike on February 14. (Note: Hak-Is and Memur-Sen, generally regarded to be more sympathetic to the government, pulled out of the strike at the last minute but declared on February 4 that they were in solidarity with the former TEKEL workers. End note.)

13. (U) During the privatization of the SEKA paper industry in 2004, after a 51-day protest, the workers were transferred to other public sector companies and all of their benefits were retained. The former TEKEL workers are holding out for the same conditions. However, media analysts speculate the GOT is adverse to making concessions to the former TEKEL workers because there are several pending privatizations that will lead to laying off another 17,000 workers. Those workers would of course demand the same financial arrangements won by the former TEKEL workers. Currently the GOT's public debt is estimated to be around 49 percent of GDP -- one of the main reasons for the privatizations -- so granting additional expensive concessions to public sector workers may not be feasible.

14. (U) The political significance of the TEKEL strike is also starting to snowball. The media drumbeat appears relentless. Opposition parties welcome portrayals of the AKP as indifferent to the former TEKEL workers' plight. Voters aligned with the labor movement -- albeit a shrinking group in today's Turkey -- will become increasingly disillusioned by the AKP, which already is wary about any potential impact for the next general election. Ironically, press estimates suggest that 85 percent of the former TEKEL workers voted for the AKP in the 2007 general elections. Nevertheless, Erdogan issued an ultimatum on February 3 that if the workers do not end their protest and disperse by March 1, he would be compelled to request the security forces to intervene and remove them. The same day, opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Deniz Baykal told PM Erdogan that "it's not the military that will bring you down, it's the TEKEL workers."

15. (C) COMMENT: Despite Erdogan's "kabadayi" (macho) image, the AKP is generally pragmatic in its approach to solving internal policy problems. It will not welcome being forced to take action March 1 to disperse the protesting TEKEL workers, with the resulting indelible television coverage. AKP is already embarked on an information campaign through its formidable grassroots and media network that portrays the striking workers as spoiled and unreasonable. Sahin's goal will probably be to let the confederations express their views in order to diffuse their tension, and then figure out some mutually acceptable terms. The GOT appears to favor harmonious dialogue with sympathetic labor unions that will lead to mutually acceptable labor conditions, although its allies in Hak-Is and Memur-Sen are viewed with contempt by the more militant unions. Meanwhile, Turk-Is, TekGida-Is and the former TEKEL workers, buoyed by support in the press and opposition parties, are developing a more intransigent attitude. AKP Vice Chairman Huseyin Tanriverdi, who was a member of the services union Hizmet-Is, and Agah Kafakas, an AKP MP from Corum, were both former Hak-Is high-level officials and are close to Erdogan. Their input during this crisis may be pivotal and, if successful, will have a lasting effect on future privatizations.

Jeffrey

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